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ABSTRACT

Recently, charter schools have gained popularity with parents, students, and others as alternatives to public schools, but what are charter schools and what effects are they having? This digest defines charter schools and clarifies some of the administrative and legal details surrounding such schools. The digest also lays out some of the potential benefits of and problems with charter schools, distinguishing commentary on charter schools from research on them, which is sparse. Proponents of charter schools say that charter schools increase parents' school choice and compel public schools to make improvements they otherwise might not make. Opponents argue that charter schools divert public monies that should be used to improve urban and rural public schools in low-income communities. Opponents also say that many charter schools are financially unstable. The Digest also highlights some research findings concerning issues such as academic achievement, parent satisfaction, and provisions for special education. (Contains 18 references.) (OR)

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Perspectives on Charter Schools: A Review for Parents

Saran Donahoo

In recent years, many parents, educators, students, researchers, and observers have reached the same conclusion: Traditional schools do not work for all students (Finn et al., 2000; B. Nelson et al., 2000). As a result, many states have passed laws enabling the development of charter schools as an attempt to better meet the needs of those students who are not being adequately served by traditional schools. Although the number of charter schools has grown in the last few years, it still is sometimes unclear what they have to offer students, parents, and educators that more traditional schools do not already provide. This Digest offers some general information on charter schools, discusses how they have been perceived, and summarizes the results of research on them.

What Is a Charter School?

A charter school is a public school of choice established through a contract that specifies the operating procedures of the school and the length of time that the school will receive public support. In most cases, a state or a local school board issues the individual school's contract or charter. Some states have created school boards specifically responsible for monitoring charter schools (B. Nelson et al., 2000).

As described by Finn et al. (2000), a charter school is considered a hybrid of public and private schools. Like public schools, charter schools are open to all students, although some may have a specific focus that is likely to appeal to some families more than others. However, charter schools are similar to private schools in that they are independent and self-governing, and the students, parents, and teachers choose to participate in the school. Unlike either traditional public or private schools, charter schools are viewed by some as more accountable for student performance because the school may be closed if it fails to produce promised or desired results (Finn et al., 2000).

Currently, 37 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico allow for the founding of charter schools (B. Nelson et al., 2000; Sandham, 2001). Charter school legislation differs in each state, but most states allow charter schools to be established by public, private, or civic organizations. School districts, colleges and universities, community groups, and parent groups have chosen to launch charter schools (Finn et al., 2000; Schneider, 1999). For the most part, charter schools are either newly created schools or pre-existing public or private schools that convert to charter status for greater autonomy or access to public funds (Northwest Regional Education Laboratory [NWREL], 2000). The federal government sees charter schools as a way of increasing school choice and plans to provide funding to assist charter schools (Bush, 2001).

Many charter schools were founded to decrease existing achievement gaps by improving the educational opportunities available to certain segments of the student population or to promote specific social skills as well as academics. Examples of charter school agendas include serving hard-to-educate students, teaching a multicultural curriculum, and promoting a curriculum that emphasizes conflict resolution and other social skills (Schneider, 1999). Some of these schools have also established contracts with for-profit companies to provide many of their services, including food service, curriculum, or management.

What Are People Saying about Charter Schools?

Since the first charter school law was passed in 1991, charter schools have continued to gain national interest and support. Proponents believe that charter schools are a practical alternative to traditional schools because they allow parents to choose the schools their children attend without having to pay tuition. Supporters also contend that they help to promote improvements in public education by increasing competition among schools (Finn et al., 2000; Lasley & Bainbridge, 2001).

Opponents contend that charter schools may have a damaging effect on public education. While charter schools increase school choice, some argue that they also direct resources away from urban and rural public schools that serve students from low-income families. Furthermore, the fact that over half of the current charter schools serve only elementary-grade students suggests that they have not had a significant impact on school choice at the middle and high school levels (Lasley & Bainbridge, 2001).

Another criticism of charter schools is that they lack stability. Since 1992, 59 charter schools have opened and closed; 27 schools closed during the 1998-1999 school year alone (B. Nelson et al., 2000). Many closures appear to have resulted from serious management or financial problems (Archer, 2000). Financing is often a major concern since most charter schools do not receive funds to cover facilities and other related expenses (Finn et al., 2000). In addition, most state funding policies give no consideration to the costs of facilities, transportation, and resources for at-risk or special education students when approving charter school budgets (F. Nelson et al., 2000).

Even so, many charter schools have learned to operate successfully by reducing their costs. Some strategies used to lower costs include hiring uncertified teachers, using parents and other volunteers instead of paid staff in uncertified positions, and providing only academic/classroom-related services.

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What Does the Research Say about Charter Schools?

Most research on charter schools has compared regulations governing charter schools in different states, assessed parent satisfaction, described how these schools differ from and affect traditional public schools, assessed how well charter schools serve specific populations of students, or discussed the place these schools have in public education (Cheung et al., 1998; Fiore et al., 2000; Jennings et al., 1998; Borsa et al., 1999; B. Nelson et al., 2000; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2000; Zollers & Ramanathan, 1998).

Research data on charter schools to date have generally been gathered through the use of surveys and questionnaires. Because of the short length of charter schools' existence and differing approaches to assessment, it is difficult to determine whether or not attending charter schools improves student academic performance.

In one of the few studies that examined academic achievement, Cheung et al. (1998) used surveys to assess the impact charter schools have on student achievement. They concluded that students enrolled in 21 of 31 charter schools studied improved performance on two rounds of the same standardized achievement tests since entering the charter school. But the authors warn against making achievement comparisons between charter school students and those who attend other public schools. For example, charter schools that serve low-income families or students who do not speak English at home may be viewed as academically unsuccessful when compared with local district schools serving a broader range of students (Cheung et al., 1998).

For the most part, researchers seem to agree that parents who use charter schools are satisfied with them because they get to choose the schools for themselves (Finn et al., 2000; Teske et al., 2000). Some parents also believe that charter schools provide a more culturally sensitive education and environment than traditional schools (Schnaiberg, 2000).

Another common research area related to charter schools is special education. Many state charter laws make little or no mention of how these schools are expected to serve students with disabilities. Many charter schools choose to discourage students with disabilities from enrolling or do not comply with federal special education statutes because they feel these services are too costly to provide (Jennings et al., 1998; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2000; Zollers & Ramanathan, 1998). Although it is illegal for public schools to discriminate when enrolling students, many charter schools are not prepared to serve students with disabilities.

Other notable research findings include the following:

- Charter schools may deter some minority, poor, and working families from seeking enrollment by requiring them to complete volunteer hours and failing to provide transportation and free lunches to eligible students (Schnaiberg, 2000).
- The racial composition of charter schools tends to follow the same patterns found in local area public schools (B. Nelson et al., 2000).
- Most charter schools do not require their teachers to be certified (Borsa et al., 1999).

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